HOME FOR CHRISTMAS
Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
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Attending a class reunion, I have discovered, is one of life's more sobering experiences. The State Champion half-miler has gained seventy-five pounds, the heartthrob halfback is bald, the homecoming queen is a plump grandmother, the brilliant but eccentric outcast is a millionaire and the class President, of all things, a clergyman in Columbus. For about an hour it's wonderful: all the outrageous stories of adolescence are paraded and celebrated and we laugh until we cry - which is what we do, authentically if privately, sometime in the middle of the second hour. It is to know deeply, existentially, that you can't go home again. And it is to discover that deep inside there is a long forgotten need to do what we have just learned we cannot do.

To talk about going home is to talk about a very powerful dynamic in the human spirit. Alex Haley exposed it with the dramatic saga of Roots. When his years of research took him finally to a remote African village, - and when after days of listening to the Griot recite the history of the tribe he finally heard the story of Kunta Kinte and wept because he knew he was home, Haley touched something deep inside every one of us. It surprised us to discover that it was there. Without prompting, my own children wept last summer as we drove away from the Kearney farm in County Donegal, Ireland, from where their great grandparents had emigrated to America. They had discovered something about themselves and the honesty and intensity of it surprised me.

There is more to nostalgia, of course, than mushy sentimentality. Some of it is that, and it has been so thoroughly exploited that a social critic was quite right when he observed that "nostalgia isn't what it used to be".

But it's there as a powerful motif in literature and music: our brother from Belfast, Donald Fraser, was touched by Londonderry Air, because it meant home to him. "When Johnny Comes Marchin Home Again, Hurrah, Hurrah":"Five hundred miles, five hundred miles, Lord I'm five hundred miles away from home": and of course, "I'll Be Home for Christmas".

In the 1920's and 30's, Thomas Wolfe probed the motif in several of the best American novels ever written, Look Homeward Angel and You Can't Go Home Again. Commenting on Wolfe's work Rollo May writes that in the 20's and 30's American literature began to express a "pronounced sense of loneliness, the quality of persistent searching - frantically and compulsively pursued but always frustrated." Wolfe wrote a lot about the conflicts which grow out of the mother-child relationship and concluded, rather dismally, as his title announces, that it is impossible to go home. And from the perspective of his psychiatric experience May observes that "neurotic anxiety occurs when patients are unable to accept the psychological meaning of not going home again." (The Meaning of Anxiety, p.4).

The experience of homesickness is, as nearly as I can tell, a universal one. I have come to appreciate very much the insight of Reuel Howe when he suggested that the deepest homesickness of all comes to those who know what a home is; that the pain of loneliness is sharpest for those who know what it is to be loved, and that there is a deep homesickness beneath the surface for all of us - a sense that we are separated from something very important. I have come to appreciate more and more that there is something about Christmas that releases all of that for most of us. We will go home for Christmas, if not literally, at least metaphorically. We

will remember the past, and be warmed by memories of love even though we know that we cannot go back and that to go back would not be very satisfying in any case. We will preserve the precious family traditions with great care. It is much more than nostalgia or sentimentality. Home is more than the place, the time, the situation to which we can never return. Home, I am concluding, is a metaphor: it is the sense that all is well: it is the sense that through the wilderness of our lives, love and beauty and safety are still there. Home is, if you will, a metaphor for salvation, and homesickness - a sense of incompleteness and longing called out of us by God himself.

The text for the day throughout the Christian world, Isaiah 40, the herald of Christmas, is the announcement of a homecoming. George Frederick Handel introduces the Messiah with a tenor aria based on the text, and for me, at least, the trip home for Christmas begins sometimes over the Thanksgiving weekend when I retrieve the record from the stack and listen..."Comfort ye, my people, says your God; speak tenderly to Jerusalem...her warfare is ended, her iniquity pardoned..In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord - Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill will be made low...the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

For me, at least, there are no more magnificent nor poignant images in the Bible than these. Babylon had defeated Judah, leveled Jerusalem and carried off the cream of society into house arrest. For a generation the Jews had lived as exiles in Babylon. The literature of the time tells the story of their pain and homesickness. My favorite is a folk song written by one of them and incorporated in the Bible as Psalm 137:

> "By the waters of Babylon
> there we sat down and wept,
> when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hung up our lyres.
> For there our captors
> required of us songs,
> and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
> 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion'.
> How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

That touches me deeply every time I read it. It's the African slave singing, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Comin' for to Carry Me Home. If you get there before I do, tell all of my friends, I'm comin' along too." It's the Scottish Highlander in an English prison singing, "You take the high road, and I'll take the low road and I'll be in Scotland afore ye." It's a group of Polish Jews huddled at Auschwitz intoning old words - "The Lord is my Shepherd, I'll not want." It's Alexander Shcharansky beginning his term in a Russian prison by announcing to the Court, "Next year in Jerusalem". Or it's you and I sitting quietly by the tree, letting the mind run free and going home.

In Babylon the Jews were homesick - for home, for the place, the land promised and conquered and tamed, the temple, the people. Life was inconceivable apart from the place. But that is not the whole story. What the exiled Jews sensed in Babylon was not just that there was a wilderness of desert between themselves and home, but more significantly that in Babylon they were cut off from God, cut off from love

and salvation. A generation of silence was their hell. Everything was not OK at all: everything was upside down and wrong and hopeless. Their longing for home was, in theological terms,a need to hear a word of love and salvation from God.

And so this letter - which is what the passage is - from some literate genius living in the rubble of Jerusalem - to those in Babylon, was a Gospel of Hope. God is coming. God is coming to take you across the desert. You're going home! The imagery was magnificent: there were no roads till a generation or so later. An Eastern Potentate sent battalions of men ahead of him to fill in the holes and trim the bumps - literally to prepare his way through the desert. That's what was about to happen, the prophet announced. And that's exactly what did happen after the Persians defeated the Babylonians and sent the Jews home.

More importantly, however, that incredible proposition, made in the sixth century BC, that God is coming dramatically into history; that His coming will result in His people going home: that their journey through the wilderness on His highway would be the promise of their salvation - all of that, we see now, is the foreshadowing of a later event: a birth, this time, a coming of God in the flesh, a coming of God which was really an invitation sent to everybody to a homecoming.

To hear the words and music is to be called home, emotionally, nostalgically. But far more important, it is to be led by Him across whatever wilderness our lives have become: it is to know that in the middle of life we have a home: it is to sense again that all is well, that battles are worth fighting, that love is worth giving, that justice and peace are still there, that death has died itself in the quiet birth of a baby.

It is no coincidence that one of the most important stories Jesus told was about a homecoming; a wilderness of miles, a young man turning his attention back to home, a long journey, and then a father - seeing him from a distance, and running down the road to welcome him: a story of a father and son embracing, a glorious reunion and a very happy family celebration.

Home, theologically, is not just the place. It is the reunion with the Father who waits for us, and in Advent - comes running down the road to meet us. Home for Christmas - is not the trip to New York or Pennsylvania or California - but the moment, when in the story of a baby's birth we feel the strong arms of our Father's embrace telling us that all is well: that we are safe: that life is good - that we are home again.

And it begins for us today at His table, a festive, family meal, the host of which is none other than God our Father.

Howard Thurman wrote a poem: Christmas Returns, which I would offer as your invitation both to table this morning and to the Homecoming which is the Advent of our Lord's Birth:

Christmas returns, as it always does, with its assurance
that life is good.
It is the time of lift to the spirit.
When the mind feels its way into the commonplace,
And senses the wonder of simple things: an evergreen tree,
Familiar carols, merry laughter.
It is the time of illumination,
When candles burn, and old dreams
Find their youth again.
It is the time of pause,
When forgotten joys come back to mind, and past
dedications renew their claim.
It is the time of harvest for the heart,
When faith reaches out to mantle all high endeavor,
And love whispers its magic word to everything that breathes.
Christmas returns, as it always does, with its assurance that
life is good.

God our Father; there are busy days ahead for us. We are grateful for their beauty and spontaneous joy. Help us to sense, in the midst of it all, your moving toward us in love: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.